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Time for National Private Radio

On the evening of February 10, the board of directors of WETA-FM, the only commercial-free classical music station in Washington, D.C., voted overwhelmingly to eliminate its music and arts programming. At the end of this month, someone will flick a switch and—*thud!*—WETA will fall to earth as just another allnews, all-talk station, and the nation's capital will be left without a public radio station devoted to beautiful and intelligent music.

WETA's transformation is a blow to the cultural life of the Washington metropolitan area, of course, which despite its succulent demographics in income and education levels has always struggled to maintain institutions that promote the fine arts. Yet our local station's fate should be of more than local interest. It confirms and will likely accelerate a trend already gaining momentum in public radio nationwide. A few days before WETA cheerfully announced its own death as a music station, WFDD in Winston-Salem, which has broadcast classical music to the North Carolina piedmont for more than 30 years, announced that it too was scrapping music in favor of all talk all the time. Together they join more than 50 public radio stations who in the last several years have given themselves up to news 'n' chat exclusively, leaving their music-loving audiences out of luck.

Something big is happening here, in other words, without fanfare, and with only token public deliberation. Public radio in the United States is remaking itself according to a wholly new sense of its mission. Originally conceived as a service for preserving and encouraging minority tastes ignored by the market—particularly in the arts, not only in classical music but also in jazz, bluegrass, cabaret, folk—public radio is being transformed into the nation's first government-funded news service. We would like to draw the attention of members of Congress to this sly conversion, and to its likely long-term effects. In the coming months congressmen will be sifting through the government's books in search of outlays that have outlived their usefulness. The \$80-plus million now being spent to build a federally subsidized news organization, under the auspices of National Public Radio, would be a good place to start.

One comment, from WETA's president, Sharon Percy Rockefeller, struck us as revealing. "We're in the business of trying to create a larger audience," she told the *Washington Post*, explaining the board's decision. Her line of reasoning is shared by the new generation of station managers who have gained control over public radio in the last 15 years. According to their conventional wisdom—though whether it's wisdom or merely convention has yet to be determined—news and chat inevitably bring in more listeners, and more affluent listeners, than classical music or jazz. And affluent listeners

draw higher-class advertisers (called “underwriters” in the painstaking lexicon of public broadcasting) and respond more generously during pledge drives.

Perhaps only students of public broadcasting will see the revolutionary nature of Mrs. Rockefeller’s remark. For the point of subsidized radio has never been to maximize its audience, and certainly not to maximize its income. It has always been sustained instead on an odd, but sturdy, rationale: Public broadcasting needed to exist *because* its programming wasn’t terribly popular. The dissemination of certain kinds of music and arts programming was a good in itself, and the government had an interest in roping off a part of the marketplace for its preservation. After all, if arts programming were sufficiently popular, the market would take it up—as the market has, for example, in the cataract of commercial talk and news stations flooding every region of the country, the very stations that public radio has now chosen to compete with. Pursue Mrs. Rockefeller’s line of reasoning, on the other hand, and you’re led quickly into absurdities: If a public radio station is in the “business” of drawing big audiences, why not fill its airwaves with Green Day or Alicia Keys and really pull ’em in?

Public radio hasn’t sunk so low, not yet, and in fairness it probably won’t. The present generation of public radio station managers take their market reasoning only so far, just to the point where it coincides (amazingly enough) with their own preferences in programming. As mostly white, affluent baby boomers, proud of their advanced educations and utterly ignorant of the arts, they share the tastes of the audience of doppelgängers they hope to attract: an indifference to forms of non-popular music and an endless appetite for chatter. We’re disheartened to admit that the market strategy is working; these programmers may be tasteless but they aren’t stupid. Today the public radio system has grown into a colossus of the American media landscape. NPR’s two signature news shows, *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*, are the nation’s second and third highest-rated nationally syndicated radio programs, after Rush Limbaugh. Several of its other shows, such as *Car Talk* and *A Prairie Home Companion*, routinely win their time slots in markets across the country. NPR has become, as its marketers like to say, a hugely successful brand, aimed straight at the nation’s most affluent demographic cohort.

Congress has tried before to tamper with the subsidy to federally funded radio. The attempt stands as one of the signature failures of the fabled Republican-revolution-thatwasn’t, away back there in the dreamy days following the election of 1994. “If the Corporation for Public Broadcasting still exists in two years,” Newt Gingrich said then, referring to the government agency that funds public radio, “then we will have failed.” Ten years later, Gingrich is gone but NPR survives, as one further indication of who really wears the pants in the great big family that is the federal government. A chief reason for the failure was the bureaucratic flow chart of public radio—a system of funding that would have puzzled Rube Goldberg. National Public Radio itself receives no direct subsidy from CPB; the money is instead laundered through local stations, who return the money to NPR in payment for the programs it produces. The intricacies and indirections of the system might lead a skeptic to think they were designed precisely to frustrate any congressional attempt at privatization.

But as our friends in the White House constantly remind us, we live in a transformational era—a time for trying the impossible. And public radio’s continued success, measured in purely commercial terms, provides an excellent justification for removing the subsidy. Already the country is awash in news and talk and “informational programming.” Is it fair to those commercial broadcast companies—who really are forced by the market to draw large audiences—to compete with government-subsidized stations aiming to fill the same market demand? Most public radio programmers are happy to boast of their success. Indeed, if you pump them with enough Chablis, they will even acknowledge that their strategy of eliminating arts programming has been so successful, and revenues to NPR’s member stations have risen so high, that the \$80 million in federal money is probably no longer essential to the system’s survival.

Let’s see if they’re right.

—*Andrew Ferguson, for the Editors*